

Understanding Poetry

When reading poetry, it is important to **evaluate** and **interpret** the message of the poem.

- An **evaluation** is a judgment, a set of opinions about a literary work based on a thoughtful consideration of it. Your evaluation of a poem is based upon how good you think the poem is and how much significance the poem has for you. Your opinion or evaluation of any poem also depends upon your interpretation of it. Evaluation depends upon interpretation, for your judgment of a poem depends on how you understand it.
- An **interpretation** is an explanation of the meaning or significance of something. When interpreting a poem, you should identify the elements of the poem by asking yourself the following:

Who is the speaker? Why did the poet choose those specific words? How are those words used? What images are conveyed through those words?

| Elements of Poetry |
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| Structure – the formal pattern of organization |
| Speaker – the voice we hear in it |
| Diction – the selection of words |
| Tone – the voice we hear in it and its implied attitude toward the subject |
| Syntax – the order of the words |
| Imagery – the details of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch |
| Figurative language – nonliteral ways of expressing one thing in terms of another |
| Rhyme, assonance, and alliteration – the sound effects |
| Rhythm – the pattern of accents we hear in the poem’s words, phrases, lines, and sentences |
| Theme – the controlling idea or implied meaning within a work |

When interpreting a poem, you should focus on the following elements:

➤ **Structure**

A poem is typically made up of lines and stanzas. The lines of the poem create stanzas, a group of lines of verse forming a separate unit within a poem. In many poems, each stanza has the same number of lines and the same rhythm and rhyme scheme. As you read each stanza, look for the different elements of poetry which are discussed in this handout. Analyzing a poem stanza by stanza makes the task of interpretation less daunting.

Robert Frost

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.



1st Stanza

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year. } 2nd Stanza

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake. } 3rd Stanza

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. } 4th Stanza

➤ **Speaker, Diction, and Tone**

The speaker is who we hear when we read or hear a poem. The words the speaker uses (diction) set the tone of the poem. The tone is the speaker's implied attitude toward the subject. The tone of the poem is determined by analyzing the words the author chooses. You must consider the denotation and connotation of each word. **Denotation** is the basic, most specific meaning of a word. **Connotation** is an implied additional meaning of a word.

For example, in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening," the **denotation** of the word *sleep* in the last two lines is "the natural, periodically recurring physiological state of rest." However, *sleep* also carries the additional **connotation** of death. When reading a poem, you must consider both the connotation and denotation of the words.

➤ **Syntax**

A poet uses syntax, the arrangement of the words, to express meaning and convey feeling. Speakers who repeat themselves, break off abruptly in the midst of a thought, or reverse the standard order of the words, for example, reveal something about how they feel.

For example, in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening," the word order of the first line is inverted: *Whose woods these are I think I know.*

The normal order would be: *I think I know whose woods these are.* In the normal order, emphasis falls on what the speaker knows or thinks he knows.

However, in the word order used by Frost, emphasis falls on "the woods," which are more important than what the speaker knows or thinks he knows. Additionally, Frost's arrangement of words (syntax) has more rhythm than the normal word order, which reads like a casual statement.

➤ **Imagery**

A poet uses imagery with the intention of triggering our memories, stimulating our feelings, and commanding our responses. An image is a concrete representation of a sense impression, feeling, or idea. Images appeal to one or more of our senses. For example, aural, tactile, and visual images appear in Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening,” in which the speaker has stopped “between the woods and frozen lake” to listen to “the sweep of easy wind” and watch the fall of “downy” flakes of snow. These words embody aural images (the gentle sounds of wind blowing and snow falling), tactile images (the soft fluff of down and the feel of gently blowing wind), and visual images (the white flakes of snow).

➤ **Figurative Language**

Language can be classified as either literal or figurative. When we speak literally, we mean exactly what each word conveys; when we use figurative language we mean something other than the actual meaning of the words. For example, when one person tells another to go *jump in the lake*, it can mean two things depending if the speaker is being literal (the speaker actually wants the other person to physically get into a body of water) or figurative (the speaker wants the other person to go away.)

Common figures of speech found in poetry include:

- hyperbole or exaggeration (“I’ll die if I miss that game”);
- understatement (“Being burned alive is somewhat painful”);
- synecdoche or using a part to signify the whole (“Lend me a hand”);
- metonymy or substituting an attribute of a thing for the thing itself (“step on the gas”);
- personification, when things or abstract ideas are given human attributes (“the lettuce was lonely without tomatoes and cucumbers for company”);
- metaphor, a comparison between unlike things (“my daughter is an angel”); and
- simile, a direct comparison between unlike things using the word *like* or *as* (“my daughter dances like an angel”).

➤ **Sound (Rhyme, Assonance, and Alliteration) and Rhythm**

Rhyme is the matching of the final vowel or consonant sounds in two or more words. *Alliteration* is the repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. *Assonance* is the repetition of vowel sounds. *Rhythm* is the pulse or beat we hear in a poem. Poets rely on these elements to express meaning and convey feeling. These elements add to the pleasure the poem offers the reader.

Read the third stanza of Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening,”

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

Rhyme is present in lines one, two, and four. Assonance is clearly audible as the long *e* of “sweep” is echoed in “ea-sy” and “down-y,” and the *ow* of “downy” echoes the same sound in “sound’s.”

Alliteration is present in Frost’s use of *s* as a beginning sound: “Some,” “sound,” and “sweep” and also as an ending sound: “Gives,” “his,” “harness bells,” and “is.”

➤ Theme

A poet develops the theme of his or her poem by using sets of key words that identify the subject and his or her attitude or feeling about it. The controlling idea of a poem is the idea continuously developed throughout the poem. When determining a poem’s theme, you should be careful not to oversimplify the poem or distort its meaning. A poem may have multiple themes because poems can be interpreted from more than one perspective, and there is more than one way to state or explain a poem’s meaning.

In “Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening,” one theme is the necessity to face the responsibilities inherent in adult life. Another theme is the ability of man to appreciate beauty, particularly the beauty of nature.

NOTE:

- Background information can be extremely useful when interpreting poetry. Knowing when the poem was written or specific historical information can reveal a lot about the meaning of the poem.
- When a poet uses repetition, the repetition is usually significant. Focusing on the repetition will be useful when making an interpretation.
- It is useful to notice symbolism when reading poetry. Seasonal symbolism is often used. For example, winter represents death; spring represents a new beginning; summer represents growth; and fall represents aging.
- Poetry is not meant to be literal. A poet chooses to write a poem so he or she can express an idea in a creative, nonliteral way.

Read the following poem without annotations; then read it again with the annotations. Read the interpretation that follows.

Theodore Roethke [1908-1963]

My Papa’s Waltz

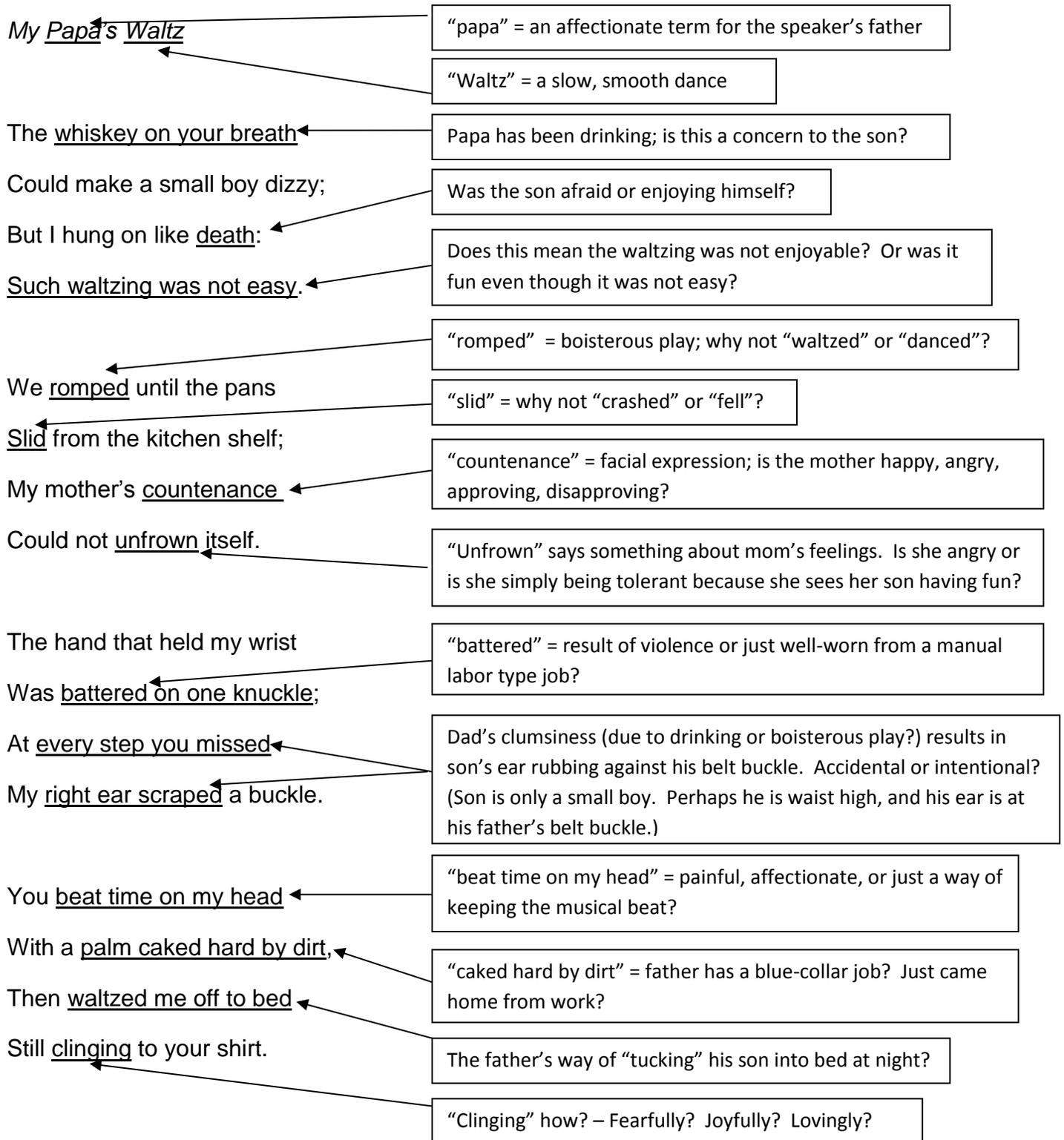
The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother’s countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt

[1942]



Interpretation for *My Papa's Waltz*

My Papa's Waltz has four stanzas; each stanza has four lines. The speaker is the son. A father and son are wildly dancing, not literally waltzing, around the house as the mother looks on. She has a frown on

her face, probably because the dancing has resulted in kitchen pans sliding off the shelf or perhaps she does not like boisterous play in the house. However, she does not ask them to stop, so perhaps she tolerates their wild dancing because she knows they are enjoying each other's company.

The dance is somewhat rough; the pans slide off the shelf and the son's ear is scraped on the father's belt buckle. The roughness could be because the father has been drinking or because the dancing is actually boisterous play. The father keeping a steady rhythm by beating time on the boy's head can be interpreted as affection, rough play, or simply as a way to keep the musical beat for their dancing. The boy is described as "clinging" to his father's shirt as the father "waltzes" him off to bed, but the language does not clarify whether the clinging is out of terror – or whether it reflects the affection between father and son.

The tone of the poem is nostalgic; the boy, now a man, is remembering the ritual he had with his father. The rhyme and high-spirited rhythm of the poem do not give any indication that the son's fear or the father's drinking are of great concern; on the contrary, the poem more likely reflects the fond memories that the son has of his father.

Practice Exercise

Sylvia Plath [1932-1963]

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful –
The eye of a little god, four cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.
Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish. [1961]

1. Who is the speaker of the poem?
 - a. a woman
 - b. a mirror
 - c. a girl
 - d. a fish

2. How many stanzas are in this poem?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 18
 - d. 3

3. Which line from the poem is an example of personification?
 - a. It is pink with speckles.
 - b. I think it is a part of my heart.
 - c. I am important to her.
 - d. Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

4. What is implied by the line “in me she has drowned a young girl?”
 - a. The woman’s daughter has died.
 - b. The woman has committed a murder.
 - c. The woman has died.
 - d. The woman has lost her youth.

5. Which line from the poem indicates that a mirror does not make judgments?
 - a. I am not cruel, only truthful.
 - b. Now I am a lake.
 - c. Whatever I see I swallow immediately.
 - d. I am important to her.

6. “I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.” *Preconceptions* are
 - a. unbiased facts.
 - b. reflections.
 - c. opinions formed in advance.
 - d. mistaken ideas or views.

ANSWERS: 1. b 2. d 3. d 4. b 5. c 6. c